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Don't think your vote counts? Think again, Lawson assures

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By ERIC BERNSEE, Editor



Former District 24 State Sen. Connie Lawson (R-Danville), now serving as Indiana's secretary of state, speaks to a crowd of more than 100 people Monday night at a meeting of the Greencastle Defenders of Liberty at the Dixie Chopper Business Center. Jack Billman (left) of Greencastle conducted the monthly program.

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In traveling more than 14,000 miles and visiting all 92 counties since becoming Indiana secretary of state last March, Connie Lawson is alarmed by a recurring theme she's encountered.

The former 16-year state senator for District 24 (which includes the northern part of Putnam County and much of Greencastle) told the Greencastle Defenders of Liberty Monday night that voter apathy has reared its ugly head in the Hoosier State.

"Everywhere we went, everyone was talking about the election," she said, enumerating topics such as who they were going to vote for or if they would be voting early.

"But one thing I kept hearing," the Danville Republican said, "was 'I'm not going to vote because my vote doesn't mean anything.'"

Such voter apathy is ironic, coming just four years after Hoosiers turned out in historic numbers for the 2008 election, Lawson told about 125 members and guests of the Tea Party group, meeting in the Dixie Chopper Business Center at the Putnam County Airport.

"As a former county clerk (Hendricks), I know firsthand the importance of counting each individual vote," the secretary of state said. "As a former state senator, I have seen colleagues' races decided by votes you could count on one hand.

"So every time I have an opportunity to explain how an election does have an effect on your life, I like to do so," she said, recounting how the Secretary of State's Office conducted a voter outreach campaign before the 2012 election that shared the uniquely true story of a Hoosier farmhand.

While out working in the DeKalb County fields on Election Day in 1842, Henry Shoemaker remembered he had to go vote to fulfill a promise he made to good friend Madison Marsh, a candidate for state representative.

So Shoemaker saddled up a horse and rode 12 miles to the nearest polling place.

There, just as the polls were closing, Shoemaker cast his ballot for Marsh, who won by one vote. After a lengthy recount, it was determined Shoemaker's ballot was that tie-breaking vote.

"At that time, the Indiana General Assembly selected our U.S. senators," Lawson noted. "And when the votes were tallied for Indiana's next U.S. senator, Edward Hannegan won by just one vote, cast by Madison Marsh, Henry Shoemaker's good friend."

A few years later, she noted, it was Edward Hannegan who cast the deciding Senate vote to declare war against Mexico in 1846.

That, she explained, ultimately led to the largest expansion of the United States since the Louisiana Purchase as the southwestern states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California and parts of Colorado were added as U.S. territories.

All possibly because one person -- an ordinary Hoosier farmhand -- cast his ballot at his local polling place, Lawson stressed.

The tagline used on that voter campaign is worth re-emphasizing, Lawson said. It proclaimed: "If you think your vote doesn't count, think again!"

In addition to sharing that message, the Indiana secretary of state explained that her office is "working on several election integrity and security measures designed to protect all of us."



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Lawson noted that the hotly contested 2000 presidential race, with its hanging chads and pregnant chads and voter challenges, helped bring about election reform through the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

HAVA is a federal law that mandated all states and localities upgrade many aspects of their election procedures, including voting machines, registration processes and poll worker training.

"Before HAVA, county clerks couldn't tell if someone were registered in another county," Lawson said, noting that the problem thus created bloated voter lists and increased the possibility of voter fraud.

Now, thanks to HAVA, county voter records "reflect who moved, who died and who's been incarcerated," Lawson said, adding that 300,000 such Indiana irregularities were discovered initially.

Regardless, county clerks still must stay vigilant, the secretary of state said, praising Putnam County Clerk Marty Watts and her staff for the catching the situation last fall where a former DePauw University student who was still registered locally tried to vote here and in her home state.

"We make sure we scrub our (voter registration) lists against surrounding states, and states like Florida and Arizona, where retirees tend to go, to guard against voter fraud," Lawson said.

She also told the audience that the new concept of vote centers is an idea Hoosier counties might do well to embrace in the near future.

Spending Election Day in Ohio County, the last of the 92 she visited in her first nine months in office, Lawson saw seven or eight precincts voting in one confusing polling place. Voters encountered long lines and the wrong lines and spent far too much time at the polls, trying to execute their civic duty, she said.

Meanwhile, a new vote center featuring 28 voting machines at one Evansville location, was allowing Hoosiers there to cast ballots at an average wait of 20 minutes.

Those Vanderburgh County voters can use any vote center location, regardless of where they reside in the county, thus simplifying and speeding up the process.

"They have no wrong place to vote," Lawson simplified.

But vote centers will be a local issue, the secretary of state stressed.

"It needs to be decided at the local level," she said. "Putnam County needs to decide if it's good for Putnam County."

Although Lawson noted that she is "thoroughly, thoroughly enjoying the job" as secretary of state following her appointment to the post last March 16 by then-Gov. Mitch Daniels, she also looked back fondly on her days as state senator.

"I have enjoyed so very much serving you the last 16 years," she told the Greencastle crowd, explaining how she had started her day Monday at Indianapolis, heavily involved in the inauguration of Mike Pence as Indiana's 50th governor.

"It's a nice way to end an historic day," she smiled, "to be among friends."